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NORTH CHICAGO — It's been more than 60 years since Frank Sublett departed Great Lakes Naval Training Center as a Navy officer, one of 13 comrades who represented the first African Americans to earn a commission.

But, as U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park, pointed out Monday, Sublett and the other members of what would come to be known as the "Golden 13" suffered a final indignity even as they broke down a color barrier: They were not afforded a graduation ceremony.

"We're here today to correct a wrong," Kirk said to some 100 veterans and community leaders gathered on Sheridan Road just north of Naval Station Great Lakes. "I want all of us to look right into his eyes and say, 'Thank you, Frank Sublett.'"

The crowd stood as one and did just that, providing an emotional high point for a ceremony marking the award of \$97,000 in federal funds toward construction of a World War II memorial in the city's Veterans Memorial Park.

The memorial, scheduled for completion in 2006, is designed to include plaques commemorating the Golden 13 and other African Americans who served in the armed forces in the last conflict before President Truman desegregated the military.

"You were part of our band of brothers," Kirk told Sublett and several members of the World War II Black Navy Veterans, which has lobbied in recent years for a memorial honoring the 100,000 blacks who trained at Great Lakes during the war.

Kirk noted that wartime African Americans, who weren't permitted into the Navy for general enlistment until 1942, "not only had to face the Japanese and the Nazis, but also racism from behind their own enemy lines."

Sublett offered brief remarks in which he thanked the crowd for the honors. He recalled his days at Great Lakes as being "many, many years ago, (and) we had a great time getting to where we had to go."

A native of Glencoe, the 85-year-old Sublett is now one of only two surviving members from the Golden 13. When Great Lakes hosted a reunion in 1994, seven surviving members made the trip to see such sights as the Recruit Inprocessing Center, which was named in honor of the Golden 13 in 1987.

North Chicago Mayor Leon Rockingham said the city considered Monday's proceedings to be "more than just an honor," saying the Golden 13 left "a legacy of courage and endurance (in) North Chicago."

"This is a site that all should be proud of," said Rockingham, speaking from the proposed location of the memorial on the east side of Sheridan Road near its intersection with Broadway Avenue.

Capt. Kathryn Hobbs, commanding officer at Great Lakes, underscored the legacy left by Sublett and other African-American military veterans by reflecting on her own 32-year Naval career.

"When I joined the Navy, women also did not have very defined roles," she said, recalling an encounter with a woman who had served in the Navy during wartime and beyond. "I asked her, 'What is the most important thing you've learned?' And she said, 'tolerance.'"